

Perspectives of Social Exclusion and Structural Injustice among Students with Disabilities in Higher Education Level

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Abstract

This study explores the experiences of social exclusion and structural injustice among students with disabilities in higher education. It aims to examine how systemic barriers, institutional practices, and social attitudes contribute to unequal academic experiences for students with disabilities. Despite increasing discourse on inclusive education, many higher education institutions continue to fall short in providing equitable access and support. This research employs a qualitative approach, utilizing questionnaires and in-depth responses from students with disabilities across various academic backgrounds. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns related to exclusion, accessibility, and institutional support. The study focuses on key aspects such as physical accessibility, learning accommodations, social interaction, and policy implementation within the university setting. The findings reveal that students with disabilities frequently encounter multiple forms of exclusion, both visible and invisible. These include inadequate campus infrastructure, limited access to learning materials, a lack of inclusive teaching practices, and persistent social stigma from peers and the academic community. Furthermore, structural injustice is reflected in the absence of consistent institutional policies and insufficient awareness among stakeholders, which often places the burden of adaptation on the students themselves. This study highlights the urgent need for higher education institutions to move beyond symbolic inclusion toward substantive equity. Strengthening inclusive policies, improving accessibility, and fostering disability awareness are essential steps in addressing systemic inequalities. By centering the voices and lived experiences of students with disabilities, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the challenges they face and offers insights for developing more inclusive and just educational environments.

Keywords: *student with disabilities, social exclusion, structural injustice, higher education, campus environment*

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INTRODUCTION

People with disabilities in Indonesia continue to encounter persistent social stigma that significantly shapes how they are perceived and treated within the educational society. This stigma is not merely attitudinal but is deeply embedded in social structures, influencing patterns of interaction, access, and participation. As highlighted in recent studies on disability and social exclusion, individuals with disabilities often experience marginalization through discriminatory practices, limited accessibility, and exclusionary social norms that position them as “other” within mainstream society (Tafirenyika et al, 2025; Liasidou, 2014). Such conditions extend beyond interpersonal interactions and are reinforced by institutional systems that fail to accommodate diverse needs (Gooderham et al., 2026). Consequently, these barriers not only affect psychological well-

being—manifesting in feelings of isolation, reduced self-esteem, and emotional distress—but also restrict the ability of persons with disabilities to fully participate in social, educational, and civic life on an equal basis (Tafirenyika et al, 2025).

Within the context of higher education, these challenges remain both visible and persistent. Although universities increasingly promote inclusive education as part of global and national commitments, the lived experiences of students with disabilities often reveal a gap between policy and practice. Empirical research indicates that students with disabilities frequently encounter various forms of exclusion, including social isolation, stigma from peers, and systemic barriers embedded in academic structures (McDermott & Mosley, 2023; Markelius et al., 2025). For instance, studies on marginalization in educational settings demonstrate that exclusion may occur through subtle yet impactful mechanisms such as lack of peer engagement, negative assumptions about competence, and limited opportunities for meaningful participation (Tafirenyika et al., 2025). These findings suggest that inclusion in higher education cannot be understood solely as physical access, but must also address social and cultural dimensions that shape students' sense of belonging.

Moreover, structural barriers within universities continue to reinforce inequality. Research on higher education systems points to persistent challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, inaccessible learning materials, bureaucratic obstacles to obtaining accommodations, and limited institutional support services (Markelius et al., 2025; James et al., 2019). In many cases, these systems operate within what scholars describe as an ableist framework—one that assumes a normative standard of ability and expects students with disabilities to adapt to existing structures rather than transforming the system itself (Nieminen, 2023). This is further supported by studies on ableism in assessment practices, which reveal that educational institutions often prioritize standardized modes of evaluation that disadvantage students with diverse cognitive, sensory, or physical conditions (Higher Education Journal, 2022). As a result, the responsibility for inclusion is frequently placed on individuals rather than on institutions, perpetuating structural injustice within the academic environment (Gooderham et al., 2026).

In addition to institutional factors, the perspectives and attitudes of non-disabled students also play a crucial role in shaping campus dynamics. Social interactions within universities can either foster inclusion or reinforce exclusion, depending on how disability is understood and responded to by the broader academic community. Research has shown that negative stereotypes, lack of awareness, and limited exposure to disability issues can contribute to social distancing and marginalization (Reid & Knight, 2006; Tafirenyika et al, 2025). Conversely, supportive peer relationships and inclusive attitudes can significantly enhance the educational experiences and well-being of students with disabilities (McDermott & Mosley, 2023). Therefore, examining the interplay between disabled and non-disabled students' perspectives is essential to understanding how inclusive or exclusionary environments are constructed within higher education.

To critically analyze these issues, this study adopts Critical Disability Theory (CDT) as its primary theoretical framework. CDT challenges traditional approaches that view disability primarily through a medical lens, which tends to frame disability as an individual deficit requiring correction or rehabilitation. Instead, CDT conceptualizes disability as a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by power relations, cultural norms, and institutional practices (Knox, 2024; Liasidou, 2014). Scholars in this field argue that what is often perceived as “impairment” becomes disabling due to societal structures that privilege certain bodyminds while marginalizing others (Gooderham et al., 2026). This perspective is reinforced by contemporary research emphasizing that exclusion is not an inevitable consequence of impairment, but rather a product of systemic inequalities embedded within social and educational systems (Knox, 2024).

Furthermore, CDT incorporates critical perspectives such as intersectionality and analyses of power, highlighting how disability intersects with other forms of social identity, including race, class, and gender, to produce complex experiences of marginalization (Liasidou, 2014). Historical and sociological studies have also demonstrated that the concept of “normalcy” has long been used to justify exclusionary practices in education, thereby legitimizing unequal access and participation (Reid & Knight, 2006). By situating disability within broader socio-political contexts, CDT provides a robust framework for examining how structural injustice operates and is reproduced within higher education institutions.

Drawing on these theoretical and empirical insights, this study seeks to explore the dynamics of social stigma and structural injustice as experienced by students with disabilities at Universitas Negeri Surabaya (UNESA). In particular, it aims to examine how these students navigate academic and social environments that may simultaneously promote inclusion and reproduce exclusion. Additionally, the study investigates how differing perspectives of students with and without disabilities shape the construction of campus environments, whether inclusive or exclusionary. Understanding these perspectives is crucial, as inclusion is determined not

solely by institutional policies but also by everyday interactions and shared social meanings within the university community.

Ultimately, this research is expected to contribute to a deeper understanding of disability within higher education in the Indonesian context by applying a critical theoretical lens that foregrounds issues of power, inequality, and social justice. By moving beyond individualistic explanations and focusing on structural and cultural dimensions, this study aims to highlight the need for more transformative approaches to inclusion—approaches that not only accommodate differences but also challenge and reshape the systems that produce exclusion in the first place.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the experiences of social exclusion and structural injustice among students with disabilities in higher education. A qualitative approach was chosen to capture the depth and complexity of participants' lived experiences, particularly regarding accessibility, social interaction, and institutional support.

The research focuses on identifying and analyzing patterns of exclusion and inequality within academic environments. The study involved students with disabilities enrolled in higher education institutions. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, with the criteria that they are active university students who self-identify as having a disability and have experienced academic life within the institution.

Data were collected through structured questionnaires comprising both closed- and open-ended questions. The closed-ended questions aimed to identify general patterns related to accessibility and institutional support, while the open-ended questions allowed participants to elaborate on their personal experiences, challenges, and perceptions of inclusion and exclusion. The questionnaire was distributed online to ensure broader accessibility and participation.

The data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis. Responses from open-ended questions were coded and categorized to identify recurring themes related to social exclusion, structural barriers, and institutional practices. The analysis process involved several stages, including data familiarization, initial coding, theme development, and interpretation. Meanwhile, responses from closed-ended questions were used to support and contextualize the qualitative findings.

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the data, the researcher carefully reviewed responses and maintained consistency in coding and interpretation. This methodological approach allows the study to systematically examine the experiences of students with disabilities and provides a clear framework for future researchers to replicate or further develop the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study aims to explore the experiences of social exclusion and structural injustice among students with disabilities in higher education. The data were obtained from participants' responses and subsequently analyzed using thematic analysis grounded in Critical Disability Theory (CDT). The study focuses on participants' experiences related to institutional systems and practices, accessibility, social interactions within academic environments, and broader campus experiences.

The participants in this study were selected based on specific criteria: students with disabilities at Universitas Negeri Surabaya (UNESA), including sensory, physical, motor, and mental/psychosocial disabilities. By centering the lived experiences of students with disabilities, this study seeks to critically examine how social and institutional structures shape inclusion, participation, and inequality within higher education contexts.

Social Exclusion

Based on the questionnaire results, the majority of participants selected scale 3 on statements such as "I do not feel fully involved in classroom discussions," "My presence in class is not always followed by meaningful participation," "I have felt ignored in group work," "I feel viewed differently by peers because of my disability," and "I experience difficulties in building social relationships within the campus environment." These responses accounted for approximately 66.7% of all participants. Meanwhile, around 33.3% selected scale 2, indicating relatively lower levels of exclusion.

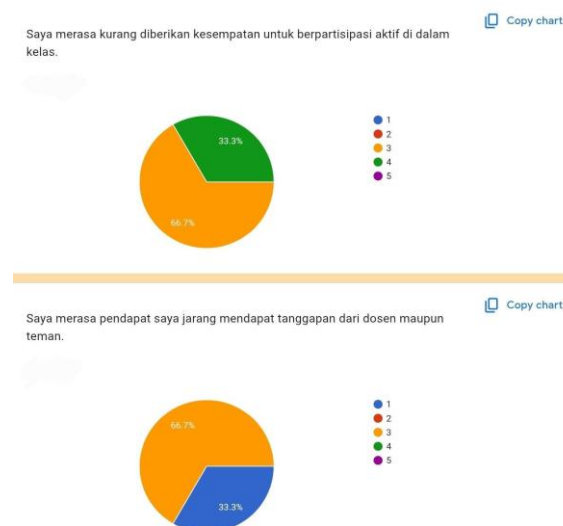


Figure 1 Social Exclusion

The dominance of scale 3 responses indicates that participants perceived their experiences as neither fully inclusive nor entirely exclusionary. This suggests conditional participation in academic and social activities. Several participants reported that they were more likely to be excluded from activities requiring physical involvement, while still being included in tasks centered on discussion, ideas, or cognitive contribution. These findings demonstrate that participation among students with disabilities is often shaped by assumptions regarding physical capability, reflecting subtle forms of exclusion embedded within everyday academic interactions.

Structural Injustice

The findings reveal that structural injustice continues to shape the academic experiences of students with disabilities, particularly in relation to accessibility and social attitudes within the university environment. Findings on institutional policies and practices reveal varied perspectives among participants regarding the implementation of inclusion within the university environment. The university's educational system has taken into consideration the needs of students with disabilities. Participants' responses were distributed relatively evenly across scales 3, 4, and 5, each representing approximately 33.3% of responses. These findings suggest that although some participants recognized the presence of inclusive policies and supportive practices, the implementation of such policies remains inconsistent across academic settings.

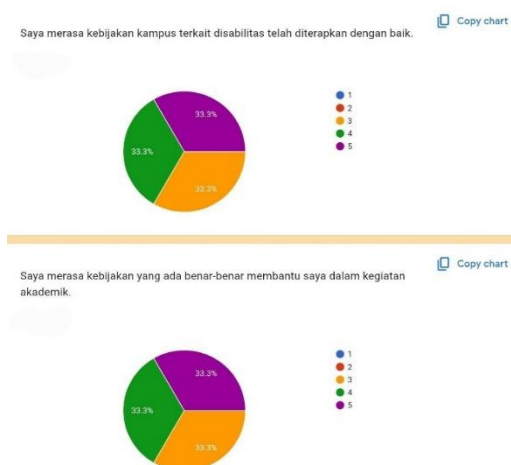


Figure 2 Social Exclusion Structural Injustice

Regarding accessibility, participants' responses on statements related to campus facilities, learning materials, and accommodation procedures were distributed relatively evenly across scales 1, 2, and 3. This variation indicates inconsistent accessibility experiences among students with disabilities. While some participants considered certain facilities and learning systems sufficiently supportive, others continued to encounter barriers to accessing physical infrastructure, academic materials, and accommodation services.

Furthermore, the persistence of unequal access and inconsistent institutional support demonstrates that structural injustice operates through systems and practices that have not fully accommodated diverse student needs. These findings reflect how higher education institutions may formally promote inclusion while still reproducing inequality through inaccessible structures, limited accommodations, and uneven policy implementation.

DISCUSSION

The open-ended responses indicate that students with disabilities continue to face challenges in navigating academic and social environments that are often shaped by normative assumptions regarding "normal" behavior, communication styles, and patterns of interaction. Participants described experiences in which they felt pressure to adapt socially to avoid being perceived as different by their peers. This suggests that social participation within higher education settings may still be influenced by expectations that privilege non-disabled norms, requiring students with disabilities to adjust their behavior in order to fit into existing social structures. Such experiences reflect the persistence of ableist perspectives that position disability as something outside the standard of typical student interaction and may contribute to feelings of exclusion or reduced social comfort.

The findings indicate that students with disabilities continue to experience barriers that are not only physical but also social and cultural. Rather than encountering only challenges related to academic tasks or institutional procedures, participants highlighted the subtle pressures embedded in daily interactions. The need to continuously adapt or modify one's behavior in order to gain acceptance may create additional emotional and psychological burdens for students with disabilities. These findings are consistent with social perspectives of disability, which suggest that disability is not merely the result of an individual's impairment, but is also produced through environmental barriers and societal attitudes that fail to accommodate differences.

Furthermore, participants expressed expectations for a more inclusive university environment that moves beyond segregative perceptions and the tendency to attach special labels to disability. Several responses reflected a desire to be recognized primarily as students rather than being defined solely through disability status. The findings suggest that although support systems for students with disabilities may already exist, inclusion cannot be fully achieved if social perceptions continue to distinguish students with disabilities as separate from the wider student community. Genuine inclusion requires creating environments in which diversity is viewed as a natural component of campus life rather than an exception requiring special treatment.

Participants also emphasized the importance of promoting disability awareness among both students and lecturers. One participant specifically highlighted the need to develop programs to help regular students better understand disability issues and recommended conducting more frequent inclusive training activities that involve all students and lecturers. This response indicates that participants perceive awareness-building efforts as a key strategy for improving the quality of social interaction on campus. Increased understanding regarding disability may help reduce stereotypes, misconceptions, and unconscious biases that contribute to exclusionary practices. In addition, involving lecturers in such initiatives is important because lecturers play a significant role in shaping classroom environments and influencing students' attitudes and behaviors.

The emphasis on disability awareness also suggests that inclusion should not be understood solely as providing accommodations or fulfilling institutional obligations. Although policies and support services are important, social inclusion requires changes in attitudes, values, and interpersonal relationships. Developing empathy, respect, and understanding within the academic community may contribute to creating an environment where students with disabilities can participate more comfortably and confidently without feeling pressured to conceal or minimize their differences.

In addition to social and attitudinal concerns, participants also emphasized the importance of improving physical accessibility across campus environments. One participant specifically expressed the expectation that accessible pathways be available throughout the entire campus for students with disabilities. This finding highlights that physical accessibility remains a fundamental component of inclusion in higher education. While universities may seek to establish inclusive values and practices, these efforts may be limited

if the physical environment itself creates obstacles to participation. Limited accessibility can restrict students' mobility, independence, and equal opportunities to engage in academic and social activities.

The expectation for accessible infrastructure reflects the understanding that inclusion extends beyond interpersonal interactions and also requires structural and environmental support. Accessible pathways, facilities, and campus environments can enhance students' ability to move independently and participate fully in campus life. Furthermore, accessible design benefits not only students with disabilities but also contributes to a more inclusive environment for all members of the academic community. Therefore, improving accessibility should be viewed as an essential component of institutional responsibility rather than merely an additional service.

Overall, the findings suggest that creating a more inclusive campus environment requires a holistic approach that addresses multiple dimensions of inclusion, including social attitudes, awareness, institutional culture, and physical accessibility. The responsibility for creating inclusive environments should not be placed solely on students with disabilities, who are often expected to adapt themselves to existing systems. Instead, inclusion should involve collective understanding, shared responsibility, and active participation from the broader academic community. Universities and educational institutions, therefore, have an important role in fostering environments that support equal participation, respect diversity, and ensure that all students can fully engage in academic and social life without experiencing disability-related barriers.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that students with disabilities continue to experience both social exclusion and structural injustice within higher education environments. The findings reveal that exclusion often occurs in subtle and normalized forms, particularly through conditional participation in academic and social activities. Although students with disabilities are physically present within academic spaces, their participation is not always fully meaningful or inclusive. These experiences indicate that social interactions in higher education are still influenced by assumptions regarding normative standards of ability, resulting in unequal participation and limited social belonging for students with disabilities.

Furthermore, the study highlights that structural injustice persists through inconsistent institutional support, uneven accessibility, and gaps between inclusive policies and their implementation. While some participants acknowledged the presence of supportive lecturers and inclusive practices, accessibility to campus facilities, learning materials, and accommodation systems remained inconsistent across academic settings. These findings reflect how higher education institutions may formally promote inclusion while still reproducing inequality through inaccessible systems, limited accommodations, and institutional practices that have not fully addressed students' diverse needs.

In addition, the open-ended responses emphasize the importance of creating more inclusive academic cultures that move beyond segregated perceptions and normative expectations of "normal" behavior. Participants expressed the need for greater disability awareness and a collective responsibility among students, lecturers, and institutions to foster equitable social interactions. Through the lens of Critical Disability Theory, this study concludes that disability-related exclusion is not solely caused by individual impairment, but is socially and structurally constructed through institutional systems, cultural attitudes, and everyday academic practices. Therefore, higher education institutions must strengthen accessibility, institutional accountability, and inclusive social practices to create more equitable learning environments for students with disabilities.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Shanita Septias Anaway: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Writing (Original Draft), Revision, Submission; **Erinna Destanya Putri:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Writing (Original Draft), Revision

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare no known financial conflicts of interest or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this manuscript.

DECLARATION OF ETHICS

The authors declare that the research and writing of this manuscript adhere to ethical standards of research and publication, in accordance with scientific principles, and are free from plagiarism.

DECLARATION OF ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCCSS

The authors declare that Generative Artificial Intelligence and other assistive technologies were not excessively utilized in the research and writing processes of this manuscript.

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